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ABSTRACT

This study examined the Family Relationships Grid (FRG), a new measure of family structure that evaluates alliances, identification, isolation, and the relative strength of sibling and marital relationships. Subjects were 52 female and 35 male adolescents who were recruited through a university course and who each had at least one sibling. Subjects completed the FRG and several family and individual measures designed to assess the concurrent and discriminant validity of the FRG. Analysis revealed that alliances, identification, isolation, and sibling and marital alliances, as measured by the FRG, were consistently related to parental divorce, family enmeshment, cohesion, open conflict, individuation, and traditionality in ways that were predicted by developmental and family systems theories. Discriminant validity of the FRG was supported by a general lack of significant relationships between FRG scores and measures of self-esteem and depression. (Author/MM)

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THE FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS GRID: MEASURING FAMILY STRUCTURE

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ABSTRACT

A new measure of family structure is presented. The Family Relationships Grid (FRG) taps such issues as alliances and identification, isolation, and the relative strength of sibling and marital relationships. 52 female and 35 male adolescents, each of whom had at least one sibling, completed the FRG, and several family and individual measures designed to assess the concurrent and discriminant validity of the FRG. Alliances/
identification, isolation, and sibling and marital alliances, as measured by the FRG, were consistently related to parental divorce, family enmeshment, cohesion, open conflict, individuation, and traditionality is ways that were predicted by developmental and family systems theories. Discriminant validity of the FRG was supported by a general lack of significant relationships between the FRG scores and measures of self-esteem and depression.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the attention paid by family clinicians to the notion of family structure, few research measures of structural constructs have been developed. Those that do exist mostly ask subjects to report directly on structural issues, or involve costly observational methods. In this paper, a new measure is presented that is designed to tap indirectly such issues as alliances (connections, or reciprocal affiliations, between two family members that define a source of support and influence within the family) or identification, isolation of members, and the relative strength of sibling and marital relationships. The Family Relationships Grid (FRG) is appropriate for families with at least four members, and has been piloted with adults and children as young as eight years old. Relations between the FRG and other measures of family and individual functioning are described. Hypotheses, listed in the Results section, were that the FRG would show concurrent validity with the family and developmental measures and discriminant validity with measures of general adjustment. The hypotheses were based largely on a systemic view of families and a developmental view of adolescence.

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METHODS

SUBJECTS

* 52 females (M age = 19.48 years, range 18-27) and 34 males (M age = 20.43, range 18-25)
* 62% were White, 12% Asian American, 6% Hispanic, 2% African American, 18% other
* recruited through a university course in General Psychology
* all subjects had at least one sibling, age 18-30, about whom a number of measures were also completed; (n=35 sisters, M age=21.80, n=8 brothers, M age=22.88)

MEASURES

* Family Relationships Grid: Participants are asked to consider a series of family triads (e.g., self-mother-father, or sibling-mother-self) and to denote a way in which two of the members of the triad are similar to each other and that differentiates them from the third (see Figure 1). The four possible triads were each presented three times. Although interesting information can be derived from analyzing the content of how subjects described the similarities and differences among family members, these results are not presented in this paper. Instead, a series of simple structural scores are presented, based solely on a count of who was described as being like whom, and how often this occurred. The assumption, supported by the results, is that alliances in families transcend the actual content, or even valence, of similarities. The FRG is presented here as a semi-projective tool -- how the subjects describe who is like whom is assumed to reveal their own view of connections, affiliations, identification, and alliance structure of the family. The scores derived from the FRG are described in Table 1.

* Family Characteristics Measure (Bloom, 1985): This questionnaire is the result of a factor analysis of a number of widely-used measures of family functioning. It yields scores of the respondents' views of their families on 4-point scales:

    * Cohesiveness (e.g.,"Family members really helped and supported one another" and "There was a feeling of togetherness in our family."

    * Conflict (e.g., "We fought a lot in our family" and "Family members sometimes got so angry they threw things.")

    * Religiosity (e.g., "Family members attended church, synagogue, or Sunday school fairly often" and "We didn't say prayers in our family.")

    * Authoritarianism (e.g., "Parents made all the important decisions in our family" and "There was strict punishment for breaking rules in our family.")

    * Enmeshment (e.g., "Family members found it hard to get away from each other" and "It was difficult for family members to take time away from the family")

* Psychological Separation Inventory (Hoffman, 1984): This measure yields four scores, describing two aspects of separation from mother and father. Items were rated on 5-point scales to measure:

    * Conflict about Separation (e.g., "Sometimes my mother[father] is a burden to me" and "My mother[father] expects too much of me")

    * Functional Dependence (e.g., "My mother's[father's] wishes have influenced my selection of friends" and "When I am in difficulty I usually call upon my mother[father] to help me out of trouble")

* Permeability of Boundaries Questionnaire (Olver, Aries, & Batgos, 1989): This measure was designed to measure boundary permeability between mothers and their children. We adapted the measure to make parallel items for fathers, and further, by dividing the items into the following variables; items were rated on 5-point scales:

    * Interest/Concern (e.g., "My mother[father] inquires about what I am thinking and feeling" and "My mother[father] worries about the food I eat")

    * Intrusiveness (e.g., "My mother[father] enters my room without knocking" and "My mother[father] goes through my bureau drawers at home.")

* Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1979): This is a widely used measure of self-esteem, for which a total score is reported:

    * Self-Esteem (e.g., "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others" and "I take a positive attitude toward myself")

* Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression (Radloff, 1977): This is a widely used measure of depression for use in the general population, for which a total score is reported:

    * Depression (e.g., "During the past week I felt depressed" and " During the past week I thought my life had been a failure")

RESULTS

The means and standard deviations for each ERG measure, separately for females and males, are presented in Table 2. No sex differences on any measures were found. Results are presented in reference to specific hypotheses.

HYPOTHESIS 1. SUBJECTS WHOSE PARENTS HAD DIVORCED WILL DESCRIBE THEIR PARENTS AS LESS ALLIED WITH EACH OTHER AND AS MORE ISOLATED FROM THE FAMILY. THEIR OWN ALLIANCE/IDENTIFICATION WITH THEIR PARENTS WILL ALSO REFLECT DIFFERENT STRUCTURAL PATTERNS COMPARED WITH SUBJECTS WHOSE PARENTS HAVE NOT DIVORCED.

Subjects whose parents had divorced presented an interesting opportunity to study the meaning of FRG family structure scores where there is a known conflict between mothers and fathers. Results of t-test analyses of differences between subjects whose parents had divorced (n=18) and those whose parents were still married to each other (n=67) revealed that, as expected, subjects whose parents had divorced described their families as less cohesive (t=-4.15, p<.001), and less enmeshed (t=-2.48, p<.025). Further, subjects whose parents had divorced reported being less functionally dependent on their mothers (t=-3.19, p<.01). They also described their fathers as being both less interested and concerned (t=-2.16, p<.05) and less intrusive (t=3.10, p<.05), and described themselves as having fewer problems in separation from their fathers, of either the Interest/Concern type (t=-2.08, p<.05) or the Intrusiveness type (t=-3.11, p<.01).

As predicted, subjects whose parents had divorced described their mothers and fathers as less allied with each other (t=-2.75, p<.01), and their families as more often including an isolated parent (t=-2.50, p<.01). This latter finding is particularly interesting in light of the lack of difference between the divorce and no-divorce groups in the total involvement of mothers (t=-0.14, p=n.s.) or fathers (t=-0.96, p=n.s.) in the allied dyads. That is, the divorced families seem to have included one parent who was excluded from the alliances, but it was not consistently either the mother or father.

Subjects with divorced parents also described themselves as more allied to their fathers than subjects with married parents (t=2.00, p<.05) and they included themselves in the allied dyads more often than subjects with married parents (t=3.27, p<.01). It seems that these adolescents had made independent relationships with their fathers, perhaps as part of their managing their parents' divorce. The two divorce groups did not differ on any of the other family characteristic measures.

HYPOTHESIS 2. SUBJECTS WHO DESCRIBE MORE ENMESHMENT IN THEIR FAMILIES WILL HAVE STRONGER ALLIANCES/IDENTIFICATIONS WITH THEIR PARENTS.

Several scores used in this study are related to the construct of enmeshed relationships: the Enmeshment scale of the Family Characteristics Questionnaire (FCQ) , the Boundary Permeability measures, and the Conflict about Separation measures. These measures show consistent, modestly significant intercorrelations with each other.

A modification of this hypothesis was supported by the data: we found that subjects who described more enmeshment in their families tended to have stronger alliances/identifications with their same-sex

parent and weaker ones with their opposite-sex parent. That is, as shown in Table 3, females who were more dependent on their mothers tended to be highly allied/identified with their mothers. And females describing their families as Enmeshed on the FCQ and their mothers as more intrusive (both indicators of enmeshed relationships) were less allied/identified with their fathers. Conversely, males describing more interest/concern from and more dependence on their fathers and more conflict with their mothers about separation (all constructs related to enmeshment) were more strongly allied/identified with their fathers. And finally, males reporting more interest and concern from both parents, more dependence on fathers, and more conflict with mothers about separation all tended to have weaker alliance/identification scores with their mothers.

HYPOTHESIS 3. SUBJECTS IN MORE COHESIVE FAMILIES WILL HAVE HIGHER ALLIANCE/IDENTIFICATION SCORES WITH THEIR PARENTS AND SIBLINGS AND THEIR FAMILIES WILL HAVE LOWER ISOLATION SCORES.

This hypothesis was only partially supported: it was found that females describing their families as more Cohesive on the FCQ had higher FRG alliance/identification scores with their mothers (Table 3). Cohesiveness was not related to other predicted scores.

HYPOTHESIS 4. FAMILIES DESCRIBED AS MORE OPENLY CONFLICTUAL WILL INCLUDE PARENTS WHO ARE LESS ALLIED WITH EACH OTHER, BUT FAMILY MEMBERS WILL BE SCORED AS MORE INVOLVED IN THE FAMILY.

Systems theory leads to the prediction that open conflict in a family is rooted in a poor parental relationship, which should be revealed in a low FRG parental alliance score. This part of the hypothesis was not supported by our data using the Conflict scale of the FCQ (Table 3-5), although it was supported by the findings reported earlier comparing divorced and non-divorced parents (surely an indicator of family conflict).

However, systems theory would also predict that families in which conflict is present but denied or avoided would have more scapegoated or isolated family members, while open conflict would tend to involve, or draw in, family members. In this sample, males describing their families as more Conflictual had higher self-involvement FRG scores, and (probably a reiteration of that finding) their families as being less likely to have an isolated child (Table 5). Conflict was unrelated to family involvement for females.

HYPOTHESIS 5. DAUGHTER-MOTHER PAIRS WILL SCORE AS MORE ALLIED/IDENTIFIED THAN DAUGHTER-FATHER, SON-MOTHER, OR SON-FATHER PAIRS. THE MEANING OF ALLIANCES WITH MOTHERS AND FATHERS WILL ALSO DIFFER FOR FEMALES AND MALES.

This hypothesis was based on predictions from object relations and developmental theories about the development of parent-child relationships. Repeated measures analysis of variance (subject sex X

parent sex) for the alliance to parent FRG scores failed to support this hypothesis.

The meaning of sons' vs. daughters' alliances/identification with their parents did differ, however, as predicted. As shown in Table 3, females who were more allied to their mothers reported more functional dependence on their mothers while females more allied to their fathers described their mothers as less intrusive. Males, in contrast, who were more allied to their mothers described both their mothers and fathers as less interested and concerned (or perhaps, more bounded in their interest and concern), to have less conflict with their mothers about separation, and less functional dependence on their fathers. Males more allied to their fathers described their fathers as more interested and concerned, and themselves as more functionally dependent on their fathers. They also reported more conflict about separation with their mothers. Alliance with mothers in this sample of young men appears to be related to more individuation, while alliance with fathers appears to be related to more family involvement, especially with their fathers. While less consistent, our findings were in the opposite direction for females.

HYPOTHESIS 6. STRONG INTER-PARENTAL AND STRONG SIBLING ALLIANCES WILL BE RELATED TO MORE POSITIVE FAMILY AND DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS.

Developmental systems theory would predict that a strong mother-father alliance is a sign of healthy family functioning and that, in late adolescence, the same is true of within-generation sibling alliances. Females with high FRG mother-father alliance scores described their fathers as more interested and concerned (Table 3). That is, where parents are close, fathers tend to be closer to their daughters. The parental alliance hypothesis was not supported for males. Both females and males with higher FRG sibling alliance/identification scores reported having less dependence on their fathers, and males with strong sibling alliances also reported less dependence on mothers (Table 3). Strong sibling alliances appear to be a mark of increased family separation, a developmental task for this sample.

HYPOTHESIS 7. SUBJECTS IN MORE TRADITIONAL FAMILIES WILL HAVE STRONGER INTER-PARENTAL ALLIANCES AND STRONGER SAME-SEX PARENT-CHILD ALLIANCES/IDENTIFICATIONS THAN SUBJECTS IN LESS TRADITIONAL FAMILIES.

Traditionality was operationalized here by FCQ measures of religiosity, cohesion, and authoritarianism. Our data do not support the hypotheses involving mother-father alliances (Table 3): alliance scores between mothers and father were not related to these traditional constructs. However, females in more traditional families had higher alliance scores with their mothers and less strong alliances with their fathers. Males in more authoritarian families had stronger alliances with their fathers (Table 3). As predicted, traditionality appears to support same-sex parental alliance or identification.

HYPOTHESIS 8. FAMILIES IN WHICH ONE PARENT OR ONE CHILD IS ISOLATED WILL BE MARKED BY DIFFICULTIES IN SEPARATION OR INDIVIDUATION.

All of the families in this sample included at least one adolescent in college, and thus in the process of leaving home. Separation/individuation was thus a salient and current developmental issue for both the subjects and their families. One family response to such stress may be scapegoating, or isolation of a family member. Data relevant to this hypothesis are in Tables 4 and 5. The isolation measures describe families as having an isolated parent or child, irrespective of whether that member is the mother or father, or subject or sibling (a low score denotes a family with an isolated member).

Females with an isolated child in the family tended to describe themselves as more dependent on their fathers; this appears to be a function of lower sibling (rather than self) involvement. Females with an isolated parent described their fathers as less interested and concerned (note that neither the total father nor mother scores were significantly related to father interest/concern). Males with an isolated child in the family described their fathers as more intrusive, and themselves as more dependent on both parents. The latter finding (about dependence) appears to be a function of their own lower involvement in the family. Males with an isolated parent in the family described themselves as less dependent on their mothers (and again, neither the total father nor mother scores were significantly related to dependence on mother). The findings thus generally support the hypothesis that isolation and separation issues co-occur in families with older adolescents.

HYPOTHESIS 9. FRG SCORES WILL NOT BE STRONGLY RELATED TO MEASURES OF DEPRESSION AND SELF-ESTEEM.

Measures of subjects' depression and self-esteem are presented to examine the extent to which the FRG measures constructs were distinct from general adjustment. As seen in Tables 3 to 5, the only significant relationship was between males' levels of depression and their scores on parental alliance, with the related score, isolated parent, and negatively with their own family involvement. Males whose parents were scored as more allied with each other and less isolated were more depressed. It is not clear from these data whether these males were actually more clinically depressed, or whether they simply were more willing to acknowledge negative affect, a trait that is probably more likely among males raised by health-facilitating families.

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Table 1
Measures Derived from Family Relationships Grid (FRG)

ALLIANCES/IDENTIFICATION INVOLVING PARENTS AND SIBLINGS

Alliance/Identification with Mother: the number of times the subject included him/herself as being "like the mother"

Alliance/Identification with Father: the number of times the subject included him/herself as being "like the father"

Alliance/Identification with Sibling: the number of times the subject included him/herself as being "like the sibling"

Alliance between Parents: the number of times the subject described his/her mother and father as being "alike"

VIEW OF MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT IN FAMILY

Subject Involvement: the number of times the subject included him/herself in a dyad divided by the number of times this pairing was possible

Sibling Involvement: the number of times the subject included his/her sibling in a dyad divided by the number of times this pairing was possible

Mother Involvement: the number of times the subject included his/her mother in a dyad divided by the number of times this pairing was possible

Father Involvement: the number of times the subject included his/her father in a dyad divided by the number of times this pairing was possible

Isolated Child: the lesser of the Subject Involvement and Sibling Involvement scores

Isolated Parent: the lesser of the Mother Involvement and Father Involvement scores

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Note: Because some subjects did not complete all 12 lines of the FRG, each measure included a control for the number of pairings possible

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for FRG Scores

	FEMALES		MALES	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Alliance with Mother	.18	.12	.18	.13
Alliance with Father	.21	.16	.17	.10
Alliance with Sibling	.19	.12	.20	.12
Alliance bet Parents	.09	.10	.12	.10
Subject Involvement	.58	.14	.54	.13
Sibling Involvement	.52	.16	.54	.11
Mother Involvement	.47	.17	.46	.14
Father Involvement	.43	.17	.46	.16
Isolated Children	.46	.14	.46	.10
Isolated Parent	.35	.14	.36	.13

Table 3
Pearson Correlations Between Family Characteristics
and Alliances Involving Parents and Siblings

	FEMALES				MALES			
	With Mother	With Father	With Sibling	Bet Mo-Fa	With Mother	With Father	With Sibling	Bet Mo-Fa
Fam Char Q-aire								
Cohesive	**.23a**	-.14	.00	.09	-.03	.05	-.01	-.02
Conflict	.14	-.09	.10	-.01	.04	.11	.20	.09
Religiosity	**.44c**	**-.25a**	-.15	.10	-.27	.00	**.28a**	.07
Authorit'n	**.25a**	-.08	-.07	.04	-.13	**.37b**	.18	-.17
Enmeshed	.08	**-.34b**	.13	.05	-.13	.22	.01	.21
Permeability of Boundaries								
Mo Intrusive	.16	**-.39b**	-.05	.01	-.24	.04	.06	.14
Mo Int/Con	.19	-.02	-.05	-.07	**-.31a**	-.03	.14	.21
Fa Intrusive	.02	-.14	-.01	.14	-.10	.24	-.15	.18
Fa Int/Con	-.10	.05	.01	**.24a**	**-.36b**	**.32a**	-.13	.17
Separation								
Mo Conflict	.06	-.13	-.22	-.02	**-.31a**	**.29a**	.26	.09
Mo Depend	**.26a**	-.08	-.12	-.05	.06	-.05	**-.33a**	-.06
Fa Conflict	.02	-.11	.08	.03	.04	.16	.15	-.05
Fa Depend	.09	.11	**-.29b**	.14	**-.36b**	**.46b**	**-.31a**	-.07
Adjustment								
Depression	-.04	.09	.06	-.08	-.11	-.21	-.08	**.37b**
Self-Esteem	.07	.01	-.18	.11	-.07	.11	.07	-.06

a: $p<.05$ b: $p<.025$ c: $p<.001$

Table 4
Pearson Correlations between Family Characteristics and Views of Involvement for Females

	Subject	Sibling	Mother	Father	Isol Ch	Isol Pa
Fam Char Q-aire						
Cohesiveness	.05	-.09	.07	-.02	.01	-.04
Conflict	-.13	.19	.06	-.13	.01	-.04
Religiosity	-.03	-.15	**.38b**	-.21	-.16	.07
Authoritarian	.06	-.13	.14	-.06	-.10	-.03
Enmeshed	-.20	**.24a**	.20	**-.26a**	.16	-.03
Permeability of Boundaries						
Mother Intrusive	**-.24a**	.17	.20	-.16	-.07	-.06
Mother Int/Con	.11	-.10	-.05	.05	.16	.06
Father Intrusive	-.15	.03	.15	-.05	-.07	.01
Father Int/Con	-.02	-.12	.00	.13	-.01	**.24a**
Separation						
Mother Conflict	**-.27a**	.07	.13	.02	-.07	.09
Mother Dependence	.05	-.11	.03	.03	-.07	-.01
Father Conflict	-.03	.07	.10	-.14	.02	.02
Father Dependence	-.07	**-.25a**	-.06	**.35b**	**-.25a**	.11
Adjustment						
Depression	.11	.00	-.09	.00	.05	-.06
Self-Esteem	-.08	-.13	.10	.09	-.20	.21

a: p<.05 b: p<.025 c: p<.001

Table 5
Pearson Correlations between Family Characteristics and Views of Involvement for Males

	Subject	Sibling	Mother	Father	Isol Ch	Isol Pa
Fam Char Q-aire						
Cohesiveness	.00	.01	-.12	.09	-.04	.15
Conflict	**.32a**	-.23	.11	-.19	**.30a**	.06
Religiosity	-.01	.25	-.07	-.11	.12	-.19
Authoritarian	**.34b**	-.04	-.20	-.07	**.38b**	-.18
Enmeshed	.06	-.24	-.08	.19	.09	.11
Permeability of Boundaries						
Mother Intrusive	-.15	.11	.08	-.03	-.11	.06
Mother Int/Con	-.21	.20	-.09	.11	.01	.18
Father Intrusive	-.04	-.27	.05	.22	**-.31a**	.15
Father Int/Con	-.23	-.03	-.12	**.31a**	-.19	.20
Separation						
Mother Conflict	.18	.01	-.15	-.01	.26	.05
Mother Dependence	**-.30a**	.03	.10	.13	**-.39b**	**.35b**
Father Conflict	**.33a**	-.15	.12	-.25	.14	-.14
Father Dependence	**-.29a**	.05	**-.40b**	**.54c**	**-.39b**	.11
Adjustment						
Depression	**-.37b**	-.01	.24	.08	-.19	**.40b**
Self-Esteem	.08	.03	-.09	-.01	.05	-.22

a: p<.05 b: p<.025 c: p<.001

Instructions for Completion of Family Relationships Grid

1. On the next page, write your name in the label area over the first column. Write the name of your sibling who is participating in this study in the label area over the second column.
2. Look at the first row. There is a circle in the column under your name, and uner your mother and father's names. Consider these three people -- you, your mother, and your father. Think of an important way in which two of these three people are alike that makes them different from the third. Any kinds of similarities and differences are fine, but we are particularly interested in aspects of personality, behavior, and attitudes. Put a check mark in the circles of the two people who are alike and leave the third circle empty. Then under the "Similarity of Two" column, write the way in which these two people are alike. Under the "Difference of Third" column, write the way the third person is different on that dimension. Now repeat this procedure for the people circled in the second row: you, your sibling, and your father. Think of a way in which two of these three people are alike that makes them different from the third. Put a check in the circles of the two that "go together" and describe the similarity and difference. Here are a few examples:

Me	Sally	MOTHER	FATHER	SIMILARITY OF TWO	DIFFERENCE OF THIRD
✓		✓	○	we're both pretty artistic	he can't draw at all
○	✓		✓	they're both very organized	I'm more messy and chaotic
	○	✓	✓	very conservative, politically	very liberal

3. Complete the rest of the form in the same manner. You will note that every combination of three people is presented several times. For each threesome, you may choose the same two people as going together as in the previous rows, but you may not -- either way is fine. If you find you have trouble thinking of more similarities and differences, you may consider how the people in your family compare on preferences, physical activities, appearance, etc. As stated above, any basis of similarity is fine, but try mostly to think of those related to personality, behavior, and attitudes.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS GRID

Remeber: Please check two of the three circles in each row to designate which two people were similar to each other. Then briefly describe how the two were similar and how the third differed. Try to think mostly of behavior, personality, and attitudes, but also consider preferences, physical activities, and appearances.

	MOTHER	FATHER	SIMILARITY OF TWO	DIFFERENCE OF THIRD
○	○	○		
○	○			
	○	○		
○	○	○		
○	○			
○		○		
○	○	○		
	○	○		
○		○		
○	○	○		
○	○			
	○	○		